

DISCUSSION GUIDE

An American Marriage

by Tayari Jones

BOOK GROUP

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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New York Times best-selling author, Tayari Jones, is the author four novels, most recently *An American Marriage*. Published in 2018, *An American Marriage* is an Oprah's Book Club Selection and also appeared on Barack Obama's summer reading list as well as his end of the year roundup. The novel was awarded the Aspen Words Prize and an NAACP Image Award. With over 500,000 copies in print domestically, it has been published in fifteen countries.

Jones, a member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers, has also been a recipient of the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, United States Artist Fellowship, NEA Fellowship and Radcliffe Institute Bunting Fellowship. Her third novel, *Silver Sparrow* was added to the NEA Big Read Library of classics in 2016.

Jones is a graduate of Spelman College, University of Iowa, and Arizona State University. She is a Professor of Creative Writing at Emory University.

BOOK SUMMARY

Newlyweds, Celestial and Roy, are the embodiment of both the American Dream and the New South. He is a young executive and she is artist on the brink of an exciting career. They are settling into the routine of their life together, when they are ripped apart by circumstances neither could have imagined. Roy is arrested and sentenced to twelve years for a crime Celestial knows he didn't commit. Though fiercely independent, Celestial finds herself bereft and unmoored, taking comfort in Andre, her childhood friend, and best man at their wedding. As Roy's time in prison passes, she is unable to hold on to the love that has been her center. After five years, Roy's conviction is suddenly overturned, and he returns to Atlanta ready to resume their life together.

This stirring love story is a deeply insightful look into the hearts and minds of three people who are at once bound and separated by forces beyond their control. *An American Marriage* is a masterpiece of storytelling, an intimate look into the souls of people who must reckon with the past while moving forward- with hope and pain- into the future.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The title of this novel is *An American Marriage*. Do you feel this title accurately represents the novel? Why or why not? And if you do find the title appropriate, what about the story makes it particularly "American"?
2. The author wanted to write a book that took on some of the inequalities of mass incarceration and really have the issue resonate, even for readers who think, This couldn't happen to me. Do you think she succeeded?
3. You may not have noticed that Tayari Jones does not specify the race of the woman who accuses Roy of rape. How did you picture this woman? What difference does the race of this woman make in the way you understand the novel's storyline?

4. Do you understand Celestial's impulse to seek companionship and love with Andre in Roy's absence, or do you think she should have stayed true to Roy no matter what?
5. There are two father figures in Roy's life: Big Roy is the one who shepherded him into adulthood and helped him grow into a responsible, capable person, but Walter is the one who taught Roy how to survive. Do you feel these men deserve equal credit? If not, which was the more important figure in Roy's life and why?
6. After Roy is released from prison, Celestial eventually feels she must submit to Roy because he is still her husband. Do you think she should have given the marriage more of a chance, or did you root for her to stay with Andre?
7. Roy is hurt when Celestial, in discussing her career as an artist, doesn't mention him or the role he played in giving her the encouragement and freedom to follow her dreams, but Walter argues that she is justified in her silence. Do you agree? Do you think her silence is due to shame, or is she just being practical in how she presents herself to advance her career?
8. It is obvious that Andre is different from Roy in many ways. Do you feel that ultimately he is a better match for Celestial? If so, why? Also, why do you think Celestial and Andre decide against formally marrying?
9. Do you think Andre strategized to get Celestial to fall in love with him, or did it happen naturally? Do you feel that it was a surprise to them that it happened after all those years? Do you predict that Celestial's parents will come to accept Andre as her life partner?
10. You can feel Roy's seething anger at the unfairness of what he's had to endure in prison and then what he has to accept on being released. Because of that, did you feel as if his rage and violence were justified?
11. What are the lessons about wrongful imprisonment you are taking away from this novel? Does the novel make you want to do more to address the problem?

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